GOD'S CANDLE

BY

JOHN OXENHAM

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GOD'S CANDLE

JOHN OXENHAM'S NOVELS

God's Prisoner
Rising Fortunes
Our Lady of Deliverance
A Princess of Vascovy
John of Gerisau
Under the Iron Flail
Bondman Free
Mr Joseph Scorer
Barbe of Grand Bayou
A Weaver of Webs
Hearts in Exile
The Gate of the Desert
White Fire
Giant Circumstance
Profit and Loss
The Long Road
Carette of Sark
Pearl of Pearl Island
The Song of Hyacinth
My Lady of Shadows
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The Recollections of Roderic Fyfe
A Maid of the Silver Sea
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Their High Adventure
Queen of the Guarded Mounts
Mr Cherry
The Quest of the Golden Rose
Mary All-Alone
Red Wrath
Maid of the Mist
Broken Shackles
Flower of the Dust
My Lady of the Moor
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The Loosing of the Lion's Whelps
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A Hazard in the Blue
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The Later Te Deums
The Sacraments
"For the Men at the Front"
Chaos—and the Way Out
"Gentlemen—the King!"
The Wonder of Lourdes
The Cedar Box
Selected Poems
The Hidden Years
The Man who would save the World

She loved much.

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By

JOHN OXENHAM

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To

MY FRIENDS

ERNEST E. TAYLOR

AND

BASIL A. YEAXLEE, B.A. Ph.D.

IN WARMEST ADMIRATION OF THEIR LOFTY IDEALS IN ALL MATTERS RELATING TO EDUCATION IN ITS HIGHEST AND WIDEST DEVELOPMENTS AND OF THEIR CEASELESS ENDEAVOUR TO REALIZE THEM FOR THE GOOD OF THEIR FELLOWS.

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God lighted Him a Candle
And set It on a Stick,
That It might lighten all the World
And make all Dead Souls quick.
And still that Candle burns—and burns,
With Never-Wasting Wick.

CHAPTER I

LONGINUS

I

LONGINUS, the Centurion, stood gazing, with knitted brow and puzzled face, at the man on the middle cross.

He was weary and hungry and, above all, thirsty. He had been on this business since dawn, and his quarters at the Prætorium called to him. And yet he found himself strangely loth to go.

Why—he did not know. But there was something about that man on the middle cross . . .

From the moment Pilate first handed the man over to him to be taken to Herod Antipas he had perceived something out of the common in him.

He had fathomed clearly enough Pilate's mind in the matter. He had been under him many years and knew his ways, and, to some extent, how his mind worked. And if he had been in Pilate's place he would have hesitated, as Pilate had done, to hand over this man, or indeed any man for whom

they howled, to those tricky priests and their snarling mob—just because they howled. When a Jew mob howled for anything, Longinus instinctively wanted to withhold it from them.

But he had followed Pilate's fortunes too long not to know that he found it necessary to walk very circumspectly in these days. For Sejanus, his patron in Rome, to whom he owed his appointment here in Judæa, had himself fallen into disfavour; and at a word from Cæsar, Pilate would follow him. And Cæsar, they said, was going out of his mind. Undoubtedly a difficult position for Pilate! Still—to give way to such a crew!

He had heard the common talk about this Teacher and his doings and sayings. He had been at first not sorry to have the chance of seeing him at closer quarters. But when matters turned out as they did, then it went sorely against the grain to be mixed up with it all.

For if there was one thing—beyond his position—on which Longinus prided himself it was his knowledge of men.

He had won his way up from the ranks by a stern devotion to discipline and duty, from which nothing on earth could turn him. Of actual fighting he had had much less than he would have liked. But that had not been his fault. Rome ruled the world, and

beyond an occasional rising here and there the world had had peace these many years.

And so, lacking the outlet for his natural powers which would have satisfied him best, he had learned his fellows, and pitted himself against them to good purpose.

When this prisoner was put into his charge he had eyed him keenly, had watched his face and his attitude under all that passed. And he had said to himself: "By the gods, this is a man!—a man out of the common! I don't remember ever meeting one quite like him." And through it all he continued to study him. And the more he saw, the more was he puzzled and impressed by what he saw.

For, through all the contumely that was heaped upon him, all the humiliation through which he had to pass, all the torture he suffered, he carried himself simply, and bravely, and unmurmuringly. And that made immense appeal to Longinus.

It showed courage and character such as one did not often meet with in these cringing Jews. He loathed the Jews and despised them.

But this man! He had heard he came from the north. Perhaps they were different up there. Anyway, he had taken his punishment like a man. Longinus said with an oath that he doubted if he could have stood it as well himself.

Throughout the flagellation the prisoner had never uttered a word. The iron-tipped points of the lash tore his back to pieces, left it a mass of quivering raw flesh. But he never once opened his lips, and Longinus had marvelled at him. He saw the red flesh shrink from the coming blow; he saw the man's eyes brimming with untellable agony; but he said no word.

As he watched, with official phlegm, just once the man raised his eyes, and their glances met, and Longinus felt something he had never felt before. Never in all his experience had he looked into eyes such as those, or seen so much in the eyes of any man. They were deep, dark pools of anguish that was nigh despair, but in them he saw also indomitable courage and a quiet, steadfast determination which nothing could turn from its end, whatever that end might be.

He had seen something of that look in the eyes of fanatics of the outer world as they hurled themselves against the might of Rome in frontier forays. But here was more—something beyond his comprehension. Anguish, courage—and, surely, something of appeal; but not, he was sure, to any mercy of man—perhaps to his gods, whoever they might be.

It stirred him as he had never been stirred before. It awoke in him a great curiosity.

Yes, this was a man indeed! He had heard strong men's screams die into moans under the torture of the lash, and their moans die into the final silence. But this man had made no sound. Longinus knew a brave man when he saw him. He ordered the flagellation to cease.

He was disconcerted when Pilate yielded to the clamour of the mob and released Jesus Bar-Abbas to them.

Watching the crowd, he had seen clearly that it was only a noisy minority which howled for the man's death. The greater part were silent, seemed puzzled and doubtful as to how things were going, and as to the rights or wrongs of the matter.

And he knew Bar-Abbas—another fanatic, but a more dangerous one than this one. Bar-Abbas was a violent fellow, always making trouble. In his latest outbreak—with Dysmas and Gestas and the rest—one of their opponents had been killed, and these three were held answerable for it.

Why Pilate should have let Bar-Abbas go was beyond his comprehension. It was simply seeking trouble. For Bar-Abbas would never be quiet till he was dead, and here had been a heaven-sent opportunity of ending him once for all. He had, without doubt, been responsible for that other man's

death, for it was chiefly he who had stirred up the riot.

Longinus had but a vague idea of what this other prisoner had done, but from the look of him it was not murder or rioting. In fact he had heard stories about him and his strange doings which seemed to point quite the other way. Anyway he was a man of courage, and it was all very puzzling.

II

On the way out of the city, when Longinus saw his prisoner stagger and fall under the weight of his cross—and no wonder, he said to himself: the man was bruised and torn beyond belief and utterly worn out—he impressed a countryman who was coming in with vegetables, a lusty, good-natured fellow, and made him carry the heavy upright.

And he was glad to think that he had kicked a vicious little Jew who had struck at the prisoner with a stick one time when he fell; and when the others pressed close to taunt and jeer he had scattered them like sheep with a threat of his sword, and would have loved to use it on them.

And all the time, and when they nailed him to the cross on the ground, he had watched him closely. At that crucial moment, when the heavy mallet drove the rough nails through the shrinking flesh,

most men raved and cursed and spat, as Dysmas and Gestas had done. But this most uncommon malefactor—if he really was a malefactor, doubted Longinus—had broken his long silence only to murmur what sounded like a prayer to his gods for pardon on his enemies. A most uncommon man!

Longinus noticed, too, that he refused the sopores when it was offered to him along with the others. The others had drunk it eagerly to deaden their pains. But he would have none of it. It really seemed as though, in spite of the obvious fact that he was absolutely worn out, he had made up his mind to suffer to the uttermost all that man could do to him, and without one word of complaint.

And at each new evidence of the indomitable spirit that was in him, the wonder and respect Longinus had come to feel for him increased.

Each time he looked at the silent prisoner on the cross, and then at the jeering crowd that surrounded it, his feeling deepened—of respect for the one and of loathing and despite for the others.

The titulus Pilate had written to be nailed to the cross had set the crowd foaming and howling again.

Some picked up stones to give more pointed expression to their feelings. Longinus snatched a spear and felled one with the butt of it, and drove the rest to a distance.

For, said he to himself, if there was any King there the only one who looked it was the silent one on the cross;—though, truly, it seemed to him that the titulus maligned him. "King of the *Jews*"—the snarling dogs who had no sense of decency nor any respect for a brave man.

But they were like that, these Jews. If he could but be their King for, say, a year, with a free hand!

But, again, he noticed that they were not all like that. It was the priests and their rabble that made all the noise and were so vicious. There were many there watching silently, taking no part in the clamour, their faces grave and wondering and doubtful, just as they had been in the early morning at the Prætorium.

They looked as though they half expected something to happen still. Longinus felt something of the same kind in himself.

What if this man were, after all, a great prophet or magic-man! He had heard it said that he had, with a word, brought back to life men who had been dead for days. A man who could do that—what might he not do? If he had come down from his cross, and blasted the jeering mob with a word, Longinus would have exulted and cheered him.

Anyway, there was a feeling of something unusual in the air, a sense of expectation, a feeling

that anything might happen, and, hungry and thirsty as he was, he would stop and see how things went.

Once or twice the man spoke, and Longinus, who had been so impressed by his silence, listened eagerly to every word.

Dysmas and Gestas, the two others who had been crucified at the same time—Dysmas on the left and Gestas on the right—had never ceased cursing their hard fate and Jesus Bar-Abbas. It was he who had led them to it, and now, for some reason beyond them, he had been set free while they hung there on their crosses. Their hottest curses were for him, but their silent fellow-sufferer did not escape.

Gestas especially was bitter in his taunts. "Come —you!—are you not the Christ? Then save yourself and us!" he cried.

But Dysmas, who had heard somewhat of this Teacher and his doings, was of a better mind. "Be quiet!" he said. "Have you no fear of God in you? We deserve what we're getting, but this man has done no wrong."

And he turned his face wearily to the strange, silent one on the middle cross, and said brokenly: "Jesus . . . do not forget me when you come to reign."

For he, like many others, had supposed that this

man who had such strange powers could, if he chose, do all that they had so hoped for in their long-expected Deliverer—could cast out the Romans and give the Jews their rightful place in the world.

And then, to Longinus's never-ending surprise, the silent one spoke again—and spoke amazingly; he who had suffered without a word the ribald blasphemies of the priestly rabble said gently to the crucified malefactor at his side: "I tell you truly you will be in paradise with me this very day."

Thereafter Gestas continued his scoffing and cursing, but Dysmas, with his head drooping heavily on his aching right shoulder, never took his eyes off the man who had made that wonderful promise, and he spoke no further word.

A man and a woman, she weeping bitterly, had drawn as near as they dared. The one on the middle cross saw them, and said a quiet word or two to them. They turned and went slowly down the mound, and Longinus wondered who they were and what the man had said to them.

III

At midday the sun, which had been shining brightly all the morning, was suddenly blotted out and a great darkness, a veritable horror of unnatural blackness, covered all the land.

The scoffers fell silent. The watching crowd thinned out, and many stole awe-stricken back towards the city. The priests and their mob of hirelings remained, but less noisily.

More than ever Longinus felt that in this sudden blacking out of the daylight there was something unusual. He knew it was not simply an eclipse, for the moon had been at the full the previous night.

And there was something truly appalling in this sudden blotting-out of everything. He could barely see the crosses, though he was standing but a few feet away from them. In that dreadful black silence he could hear his men breathing heavily.

Dimly, disjointedly—in broken gasps of thought—he wondered if this was the end of the world. The gods were evidently angry at what had been done. He connected it all, vaguely, with the silent prisoner on the middle cross. It was all in keeping—this awful silent blackness, as though heaven and earth had been stricken with sudden death, the silence of that strange man on the cross.

How long it lasted he did not know. But suddenly the silence was broken again by the silent one: "Elôi, Elôi, lema sabachthanei!"—at which some of those who heard jeered: "He is calling for Elijah. Let us see if Elijah will come and take him down."

Longinus did not fully understand the words, but he said to himself: "He is calling on his gods for help"; and he waited, expectant and hopeful.

And again he felt that nothing would have been more to his taste than the sight of that drooping figure flaming suddenly into marvellous life, springing from the cross, and sweeping all these venomous ones to perdition.

But nothing happened, because that which was happening was the greatest thing the world had ever known, and it was beyond the understanding of any mortal man.

Longinus had witnessed too many crucifixions not to understand to their fullest all the awful agonies of the cross. That this extraordinary man should have endured them in silence impressed him more than all the rest. No man, who was only a man, could have stood it all like that. It was beyond nature.

It came at last almost as a relief to his tight-strung feelings to hear from the sufferer's pallid lips a murmur: "I thirst"—words in such common use that he understood them.

Gestas had been crying and cursing and moaning for drink for hours. They had paid no heed to him. That horror of thirst was a due part of his punishment. His men could have assuaged it in a moment

from the jar of posca from which they drank at times themselves. But they let him be. It was his due.

But when, in his unbearable torment, this other murmured his thirst, Longinus stooped quickly to the jar, pulled out the sponge with which it was plugged, and, dipping it in the drink, held it up to the sufferer.

Low as the rough cross was he could not quite reach up to his mouth. He picked up a hyssop stalk about a foot long, stuck it into the sponge, and held it to the parched lips.

"Let be! Let be!" cried the High Priest's crew. "Let us see if Elijah will help him." But Longinus paid no more heed to them than if they had been buzzing flies.

At the touch of the sponge the man's eyes opened. As he sucked it gratefully he looked once more at Longinus out of the depths of his untellable agony. And again Longinus felt that look go through and through him. It was as though a sword had pricked his heart—as though something new and strange to him, of mighty import but quite beyond his understanding, had cleft through the outer husk of him and filled his whole being with a tumult of wonder and expectancy.

Once, in Rome, he had been face to face with

Cæsar. He had looked him straight in the eye without a blink or the movement of a muscle of his own hard-bitten face. He had given him look for look. But the lowering insolence of Cæsar's eyes had roused in him no feeling of devotion, or even of loyalty. The reverse, indeed; though, for his life's sake, he let no sign of it appear. For, within him, beneath the brazen mask which seemed but part of his helmet, he was saying to himself: "That!—our Cæsar! Ye gods!"

And here he was, stirred as never in his life before by a look from the eyes of this dying Jew on his cross!

The man's strength was going fast. Longinus could see that. Well, it was better so. His torment would be the sooner ended.

And even as he stared at him, still in the grip of that last look which had wrought such tumult in him, the sufferer stiffened, suddenly and amazingly, on his cross, and, lifting his head high, gazed piercingly upward, as though he saw through the still-darkened sky something that was hidden from the rest.

Longinus followed his look hopefully. There was still the chance of his gods coming to his help and confounding these venomous Jews.

But the man gave one great cry—not a cry of

despair or agony. It was as though he spoke confidently and familiarly to someone up there.

Then, as his head sank down again upon his chest, one final word, and then—as the tortured body relaxed and hung limp and heavy from its painful fastenings—" He's gone," said Longinus to his men.

And suddenly the earth shuddered and quivered beneath them, the three crosses rocked loosely in their rough sockets, and from the city close at hand they heard the crash of falling houses.

" Of a surety this was more than man," said Longinus hoarsely, and his men stood grimly to their arms, wondering what would happen next.

CHAPTER II

MARY OF MAGDALA

I

THE black pall which had shrouded the earth drew off, and the day seemed to shine the brighter for its late suppression. The most tremendous fact in the history of humanity was being accomplished before their very eyes, but the overwhelming magnitude and meaning of it was hidden from them all.

That rough cross on the mound outside the gate was the dividing point between the old life and the new.

To one heart only in all that multitude was any glimmer of understanding vouchsafed, and even that was obscured and almost buried beneath its load of bitter loss and personal grief.

The remnants of the crowd and the priestly rabble went away down the mound towards the Damascus Gate, silent and stricken for the most part, some giving vent to their qualms and fears.

There remained only three or four isolated figures,

kneeling or bowed to the ground. Longinus looked round at them, and wondered why they had not gone with the rest.

The nearest was a woman, crouched in a dark heap with her robe drawn down over her face. She had crept silently nearer as the others went away.

Beyond her lay a man with a grim, dark face, and wild eyes straining fiercely at the three crosses. Longinus set him down as one possessed. He had noticed him in the crowd as they came out of the city.

And a little farther away was one whom he knew well—Jesus Bar-Abbas, who, by rights, ought to have been on that middle cross. He sat there on a rock, bending forward, with his hands clasped tightly round his knees, and stared fixedly at the man on the middle cross with a look of wondering amazement on his face.

Longinus said to himself that he would wager a goodly sum as to what he was thinking about.

He wished the sun would sink more quickly towards the west, where the clouds were banked, brooding and ominous, like the walls of a beleaguered city. For then he could have the prisoners' legs broken and get back to his quarters. The morrow was the Sabbath of the Jews, and some kind of special feast-day, which must not be polluted

by dead bodies on crosses. Queer folks these Jews, and not likeable.

As he tramped to and fro, to make the time pass more quickly, whenever he turned his eye sought the middle cross. He was glad the man was dead. He would not have liked to have had his legs broken. He had suffered enough. And the way he had borne it! . . . Yes, truly!—a marvel of a man!

Once, as he stood looking at the man, before turning to resume his tramp, he started, and stiffened with surprise. For, as he looked, it seemed to him that the heavy lids which vailed the great searching eyes opened slowly, and that from their depths the man looked back into his eyes and heart as he had done before.

He braced himself testily, stared for a moment, then strode forward and reached up his hand to the side of the man. But there was no sign of heart-beat and his flesh already felt cold. And his eyes were closed when Longinus looked up at them.

II

When Longinus resumed his tramp it seemed to him that the crouching woman had drawn still nearer while his back was turned.

He strode towards her. She drew back the fold

of her robe from her head and he stood in wonder at the sight of her face.

Her great dark eyes were swollen with sorrow and much weeping, they were swimming still with her tears. And her face was puffed and mottled with the pressure of her hands, in which it had been buried. But Longinus perceived that in its natural state it must be an unusually beautiful face.

And he was a judge. In the ordinary course—a Jewess—beautiful—and alone, he would have tossed her a light word and followed it up perchance.

But now—here—no! Something had happened. His only thought was why she sorrowed so. Was it for Dysmas—or Gestas—or the one in the middle?

"Sir," she said, looking up at him with her heart's longing in her sorrowful eyes, "will you let me but kiss his feet just once?"

"Which, then? And what is he to you?"

"Jesus—the middle one," she said eagerly—hopeful since he had not at once repulsed her.

"What is he to you?" he asked again.

"My Lord and Master—my Deliverer. He saved me—from myself. Oh, why—why? . . . Why have you done this terrible thing?"

"Who was he, then?" he asked, with quickened interest. This woman could perhaps cast some light on what had puzzled him so.

"He was the Christ—the son of God—the High and Holy One."

"By the gods, I knew he was no common man!" And, elated by her endorsement of his own prescience, he said: 'It is against the rules. But the man is dead. You may go."

And, stumbling in her eagerness, she ran forward and knelt at the foot of the cross. She clasped the rough bole with her arms and bowed her head on her Master's feet and kissed them passionately again and again.

Her grief broke out again at sight and touch of those wounded feet, crumpled and twisted to the agonizing thrust of the nail. The blood from the ragged wound had dried upon them. She washed it away with her tears.

Once she raised her streaming eyes to the beloved face above her—and sat back suddenly with a gasp, and gazed with wonder and awe.

For it seemed to her, as it had seemed to Longinus, that the heavy lids had opened in their anguished hollows, and that the beloved eyes were looking deep into her soul, as they had so often done before.

Her hand flew to her heart, for it was beating as though it would break through. She glanced wildly round at Longinus, who stood just behind her, and whispered: "I thought—for a moment . . ."

His strong hand fell gently on her shoulder and he led her back to where she had been crouching.

"I know," he said quietly. "I thought so too a little while back. But he has been dead this hour and more. Of a surety he must be a son of God, for though he is dead he yet looks at us."

And Mary sat watching.

CHAPTER III

JUDAS OF KERIOTH

I

THE grim, dark man with the wild, staring eyes, whom Longinus had judged to be possessed of a devil, still lay gazing fixedly at the middle cross, with a look and a face which Longinus, in spite of all his knowledge of men, could make nothing of. He dismissed his puzzlement with a brief, "He has a devil."

And, truly, nothing short of that could explain the man.

He had been in the crowd in front of the Prætorium. With the rest he had followed the prisoners as they toiled with their crosses through the narrow street to the Gate.

But he kept on the outside of the crowd and was never one of it. His looks set him apart. He spoke to no one, nor did any speak to him. There was something about him that made those nearest him draw away. No need for him to thrust his way through the throng. He strode straight on, heedless

of everyone. If man or woman or child had fallen before his ruthless course he would have trampled over them without knowing or caring.

He looked, as he was, a man possessed, and possessed not of one devil but of many.

Longinus was right in his hasty judgment, but he little knew into what depth of bedevilment the man was plunged.

He had stood watching afar off while the crosses were lifted and dropped into their sockets. His wild eyes were fixed on the man on the middle cross, with such a look as this world has never seen before or since.

In that grim and ghastly face of his were despairing anguish, deadly fear, anger of frustrated hope, torment as of a soul lost beyond possibility of redemption, and yet withal a fanatic expectancy which refused to die entirely.

A shudder shook him at times, as though the soul within him wrung him hard and would have discarded him if it could.

When that great darkness came, and he could no longer see the cross, he fell prone, and lay with his face on the ground and his hands knitted at the back of his neck in a very agony of abasement.

And so he lay, without movement even when the earth heaved and shuddered beneath him. He

heard the cries from the cross, and at the final words he rose shakenly to his knees with his hands on the ground, crouching like a wild beast whose prey is escaping him.

He watched Longinus go up to the middle cross and lay his hand on the man's heart. He heard his words to his men. And at that a groan escaped him, though there still remained in his eyes that gleam of strange wild expectancy, as of one who would not give up hope even in the face of fact.

He saw Mary of Magdala's abandonment of woe at the foot of the cross.

He saw her start of amazement when she looked up at the Master's face. The wild flame of his avid desire blazed up in him. It was not too late even yet. If the Master would he could release himself and come down and proclaim himself King of the Jews in very truth, as Pilate had called him in derision—and the wonder and triumph of it would be the greater for all that he had suffered.

It would be magnificent. The whole nation would rise and follow him. The whole world would ring with it. And he, Judas, who had done so much to bring it about, would reap the reward of his cleverness. And those tricky priests and their rabble would learn the mistake they had made.

His fierce, craving eyes never wavered from the

middle cross. The passion that possessed him seemed to string his faculties to their highest pitch.

For as he gazed, with all the madness of the desire that was in him—surely!—yes, the eyes of him on the cross opened in their shadowy deeps and looked at him—with a look that shook him to the depths.

Crouching low, he crept up on his hands and feet to Mary's side.

"He is not dead," he said, in a hoarse whisper. "They could not kill him. . . . I knew they could not kill him."

And at his words Mary turned her woeful face to him, and drew her robe more closely about her, as though he were a leper.

"You!" she gasped, and was struggling to her feet to get away from him. But he grasped her robe with a claw-like hand and dragged her down again.

"Listen, Mary!" he said, with the vehemence of madness. "I never looked for this, never! . . . Never!" He spoke in quick, hot jerks, with gasps between as the fury within him boiled up and out. "I knew they could not harm him . . . if he so willed. . . . Those cursed priests! . . . It needed but a word from him . . . the people would have proclaimed him King. . . . All that we have longed for. . . . Only a word. . . . But

he wavered. . . . The chance was almost lost . . . everything lost . . . and we had counted so on him. . . . But . . . but . . ."

"You gave him away," said Mary bitterly, as he choked with the impotence of his anger.

"But not for this . . . not for this. . . . I never intended this. . . ."

"The end is the same. You have done him to death."

"I did not think it possible. . . . It is not possible. . . . He who could raise the dead. . . . But he is not dead. . . . He looked at me. . . . He will come down and confound them all yet."

"Nay, he is dead—what of him can die," she said brokenly. "And it was your doing. The shame of it be yours for ever!"

"I never meant it. . . . I never meant it. . . . Before God, I swear I never meant it. . . . When he rode in like a conqueror that other day I was sure of him. . . . They hailed him King. . . . Then his heart seemed to fail him. . . . It seemed as though nothing would come of it, and so I tried to bring it about. . . . And this is not the end. . . . He will come down yet. . . ."

Mary drew her robe over her head and spoke no more, nor gave any heed to his ravings.

But presently he fell silent, and then, after a time,

a groan of deepest despair broke from him, and Mary looked up.

The sun was sinking, red and lurid, towards a bank of purple cloud in the west. A few minutes more and the Sabbath would have begun. And the order had been given that, as that Sabbath was a very special feast-day, all signs of the executions should be done away with before the night came.

The soldiers were nothing loth. They wanted to get back to their quarters. But their lives were answerable for these three on their crosses. There must be no possibility of escape for them. The crucified lingered sometimes for days before death released them.

So, with a heavy wooden mallet, they smashed the legs of Gestas and Dysmas, and they died.

The man on the middle cross they left, since he seemed to be already dead.

"No need to break him," said Longinus. "He has been dead these many hours."

"We'd better make sure," said one, and thrust his spear into the man's heart. For cases had been known of a crucified one, hanging apparently dead, having been rescued from the cross by his friends and brought round to life again.

Before the groans of the broken ones had died into the silence that betokened the end of their

torment, Judas rose to his feet, threw up his arms in a gesture of despair and, without a word to Mary, sped swiftly down the mound into the shadows.

Satisfied that their work there was fully done, the soldiers gathered up their spoils and their belongings —the victims' clothes, their wine-jars and tools and weapons—and prepared to depart. It was not their place to bury the dead. Those to whom they belonged could see to that.

But before they could go there came up from the city a small, sad company, furtive in its movements, as though not desirous of attracting any observation.

It brought a message from Pilate to Longinus that the body of Jesus of Nazaret could be given up to them if Longinus was satisfied that he was dead.

Mary watched breathlessly while the newcomers carefully and reverently took down the body from the cross and wrapped it in a great linen cloth.

As they bore it away down the mound she followed them at a distance, to see where they would lay him.

And on the evening stillness came the careless voices of the soldiers, talking of the day's doings as they clanked down the steep way to thei rquarters.

As a simple matter of duty—all in the day's work —they had been at the great turning-point in the

history of mankind. They had been eye-witnesses of the greatest happening the world had ever known. Their only concern was to get back as speedily as possible to their quarters and to something to eat and drink.

But on Longinus there remained the spell of the man, and it was to remain with him till he died.

CHAPTER IV

JESUS BAR-ABBAS

I

BEHIND them all, as they descended the mound, came that other whom Longinus had noticed sitting on a rock, aloof from all, watching everything that was done, with a look on his face which had given Longinus a clue to what he was thinking.

It was a look of puzzled amazement, as if here was something entirely beyond his comprehension. As long as he lived he never quite lost that look.

His life had been a turbulent one, full of risks and adventures, of crazy hopes and endless disappointments, of violence and bloodshed.

After the failure of his last rising, in which a man had been killed, he knew, when the soldiers took him, that that was the end of him. He gave up hope and awaited his death with stolid resignation.

There was none to speak for him. By his violence he had put himself outside the pale. When they heard that he was at last safely dead, people would heave a sigh of relief and say it was a good riddance.

So he lay there in the prison, waiting for the day when these brutal Romans would drag him out, and scourge his skin off, and nail him to his cross, to hang there perhaps for days.

He could imagine all the horror of it. He had once met a man who had been crucified by mistake, and hung for half-a-day before they found the mistake out. What he had been able to tell of his torment was terrible. What he had been unable to tell was more terrible still in what it left to the imagination.

Then, at last, to his hopeless brooding had come this day, when he was dragged out of his hole, roughly cleansed of his filth, thrust into some clothing, and hustled, stumbling and blinking, up the steps that led to the platform of the Prætorium. And louder and louder, as he drew nearer to it, he heard the clamour of a mighty mob, and in its raucous shoutings his own name repeated over and over again. It sounded to him like a pack of wild beasts howling for his blood.

On the platform, as soon as his eyes grew accustomed to the light, he saw Pilate, the Procurator, standing looking down on the seething mob with a face of uttermost contempt and disgust.

And near him stood another, a man of about his own age and height—a prisoner also, for his hands

were bound behind his back and he looked as if he had been the victim of rough treatment.

His face was deadly pale, and bore the marks of bruises. An old purple robe had been flung over his shoulders—to make a jest of him, Bar-Abbas thought. But if that was so the jest failed, for he stood up straight and uncowed, and looked out on the howling mob calmly and without flinching.

As Bar-Abbas stumbled up on to the platform, blinking like an owl in the early morning sunlight, the other looked at him—and Bar-Abbas never forgot that look.

For the man's eyes seemed sunk deep inside his head with what he had gone through, and yet, as they met Bar-Abbas's quick glance of white-eyed apprehension, there was something in them which made his heart leap within him. No one had looked at him like that for many a year—not since he was a boy and his mother taught him the Scriptures at her knee. His thought flew back to her and his father, the old Rabbi.

That was very long ago, and he had done much ill since then. But the look in that man's eyes had taken him right back, for that was how the old people used to look at him.

But all that passed in a moment.

What was Pilate saying? He had lifted his hand to still the clamour below:

"Here are Jesus Bar-Abbas and Jesus, the so-called Christ. Which of them do you want me to release for you?"

And Jesus Bar-Abbas reeled and almost fell at the mighty shout that went up: "Bar-Abbas! Bar-Abbas! Release to us Bar-Abbas!"

He could not believe his ears. It meant life to him and he had come up to die.

"Then what am I to do with this other—Jesus, the so-called Christ?"

"Crucify him! Crucify him!"—it was like the howling of hungry beasts in the desert.

"Why—what has he done? I find no wrong in him," said Pilate disgustedly.

"Crucify him! Crucify him!" they howled the more fiercely.

Then, with a gesture that was like a curse upon their malevolence, Pilate sent for a basin of water and a towel and washed his hands there before them all, saying: "I am innocent of this good man's blood. It is your affair."

"His blood be upon us and our children," they cried.

And Pilate curtly bade his people set Bar-Abbas free; and the other he told Longinus, the

captain of his guard, to deal with as the people wished.

Then he turned and went into the Prætorium.

Longinus, in turn, curtly bade Bar-Abbas begone. And he, with limbs that trembled so that they could scarce support him, crept down the steps and lost himself in the crowd.

No one paid any attention to him. They were still shouting frenziedly or talking excitedly among themselves.

It was not the life of Jesus Bar-Abbas they desired, but the death of Jesus, the Christ.

But as he slipped away among them Bar-Abbas saw that not all were so minded. There were many standing in puzzled silence, not knowing what to make of it all.

II

It had been in Bar-Abbas's mind, so far as he could think connectedly at all, to put the greatest possible distance between himself and the Prætorium in the shortest possible time. With people like Pilate and his men you never knew. . . .

But as he drew to the thinning outskirts of the crowd his steps halted.

The knowledge that he was free, that there was no scourging for him, no cross with its lingering torments, was almost too much for him. But another

thought had been unconsciously working in him, and now it overpowered him.

That other!—that strange, quiet man who had looked at him in that strange, comprehending way! —who was to undergo his scourging and be nailed upon his cross!—he could not turn his back on him like this and go right away. He must stop and see what happened to him.

Pilate had not wanted to give him up to this noisy mob. He had seen that. He had said he was a good man. Perhaps he would still think better of it and balk them of their prey. Then they might turn round and howl for Bar-Abbas. Fickle folk! He knew them only too well. He would keep at the edge of the crowd and be ready to bolt, but he must see what befell that other.

He was aching to ask someone what it all meant —who that other man was, what he had done. For he had been so busy with his own affairs before they took him, and then so long in prison, that he was out of touch with things.

So he could only watch and wonder, and be ever more and more thankful that he was here and not there.

He had always had unusually good sight. If he had been in there now he might have had no eyes left to see with.

For he knew what the flagellation before crucifixion was like. Those brutal whips, with their lashes tipped with bits of iron or bone! If one of them struck your eye, as sometimes happened, it plucked it out like plucking an olive, and there you were. And if they'd crucified you by mistake, as they did that wretched Zadok, they could not put your eye back for you.

The clamour had died down. With the getting of their way the noisy ones had fallen almost silent. There was buzz of excited talk, no more.

And even that ceased as the coarse laughter of the soldiers, inside with the prisoner, was plainly heard.

Then came the dull thud of the scourging, and a greater silence fell upon them, and some among them shivered, for they knew what it was like.

And then Bar-Abbas's eyes nearly started out of his head as he saw his fellow-rioters, Dysmas and Gestas, dragged along to the place of scourging. He had forgotten them in the excitement of his own strange escape.

After a while the prisoners were brought out again, and after one glance at the two he knew—cowed and broken now, but still impotently cursing their tormentors—his gaze settled intently on the other, the man who was where, by rights, he should have been.

A strange and, by the coarse humour of the soldiers, even a grotesque figure he was now. For the soldiers had played on the jibe which Pilate had made before Bar-Abbas was brought out, that this was the King of the Jews. At which the mob had yelled, in the abasement of their hunger for the man's blood, that they had no king but Cæsar.

Of that Bar-Abbas had heard nothing and so was the more puzzled by the strange appearance of the man.

In their mockery of this suggestion of kingship in one so friendless and helpless, the soldiers had placed on his head a crown of platted thorn. One had crushed it down on to his brow. The sharp points had pierced, and the blood had trickled down over his face, marring its comeliness. They had flung the old purple robe about his torn and bleeding shoulders, and in his hands, for a sceptre, had placed a long reed. And as they pushed him to the front of the platform one announced in a loud voice: "The King of the Jews"—at which the shouts of "Crucify! Crucify!" broke out afresh.

Bar-Abbas had eyes for none but the man, and the more he regarded him the more he wondered.

For, as he stood there, submissive but undaunted, bruised beyond belief but not broken, there was

about him a strange, gentle dignity which no overload of contumely could hide.

In some subtle way which he could not have explained Bar-Abbas knew that here was a brave man —that his submissiveness came of his strength, not of weakness, that it was of his own will, not bruised into him by his enemies.

Compared with the wild eyes and frenzied faces of the howlers below, the man in his mock-royal robes looked a king indeed.

Then they took him down, with Dysmas and Gestas, to where the rough logs of their crosses had been brought out. These were loaded on to their bleeding backs and they were led away, with the mob surging after them to see the end.

And, last of all, in their robes of office and all the pride of accomplishment, came Caiaphas and Annas and the rest. Their faces were very grave, however. They had got their way and this upstart Upsetter was going to his death. But . . .

III

The crowd swarmed tumultuously through the narrow streets towards the Damascus Gate, and Bar-Abbas perforce went with it. He must see the end.

And as he went there beat in his mind—nay, in

his inmost heart—a strange rune, which stirred him like the call of a trumpet and would not be stayed.

Over and over, again and again, it came:

"*It is* my *cross he is carrying!*
It is instead of me *he is suffering!*
But for him I *would be there, going to my death!*"

The crowd gabbled and elbowed about him, with sudden halts when the one whom they seemed to hate so stumbled at times under the weight of his cross. Then they broke into jeers, and some struck at him with sticks, till the Centurion threatened them with his sword.

The man's strength was obviously failing him. The burden of the cross on top of the scourging was too much for him. But though his body might fail him his spirit was undaunted.

He staggered up again after each fall and stumbled bravely on, but his face, dripping with blood and sweat, showed what he was suffering and that he could not stand much more.

His eyes were mostly cast down. He did not give one look at his tormentors. But when, as they squeezed through the Gate, Bar-Abbas was crushed nearer to the prisoner, he caught just a glimpse of those downcast eyes and saw that they were strangely alive and alight in their deep pits under his brows.

And in the man's face, beneath the blood and the sweat and the bruisings, there was a marvellous quietness—not the stolid resignation of a broken man, but the calm resolution of a brave one.

Bar-Abbas perceived these things because he had been a leader of men himself. His life of late years had been mostly outside the pale of the law, but he had had to trust the men under him, and to trust them he had to know them. And he perceived that this man's quietness was strength, not weakness, though his body was failing him.

He was glad when the Centurion caught a stout countryman, who stood aside to let them pass, and made him carry the big beam of the man's cross.

They got on better then, and when they were through the gate the crowd could spread out, and he kept well on the outside of it.

He would have liked to ask what this man had done that had made the priests and their people so furious against him. More,—so keenly was he feeling about it all, that had he been free he felt as though he might even have offered to help the man with his cross himself.

But he was not free. His past ill-deeds, and the shadow of death in which he had lain so long, held him back. He feared to do anything that would attract any attention to himself, and so he stood

aloof and watched while the forlorn ones staggered up the mound.

And all the time his heart was crying out:

"*He is suffering all this for me! But for him I would be where he is!*"

It beat furiously in him when he heard the hammer drive in the nails.

It nigh deafened him when the cross was lifted and jolted into its socket, and he saw the limp body sag down and the blood gush from the tearing of the nailed hands.

"*All this for me! But for him I would be there!*" He sank down on a lump of rock, well behind the crowd. They had no eyes for anything but what was going on in front of them. And so, alone and aloof, he sat and watched.

Hardened as he was, and used to the ruthlessness of life and all its strange possibilities, his mind was still in a vast confusion. It had not yet had time to adjust itself to the fact that he was still alive.

By rights it was *his* tortured body that should be hanging there, *his* blood that poured from those torn hands. It was good to be still alive, but . . . Well, it was all beyond him.

Dysmas and Gestas! He was sorry they were ending so. They had been a lusty pair in many of

his enterprises. But he had little thought to spare for them. All his puzzled mind was concentrated on the man between them—so different from those others.

They cursed without ceasing—their enemies, their fate, their leader Bar-Abbas, who ought to have been there with them, but had somehow slipped through the net.

But the one between them hung there in silence —no complaints, no reproaches, though the jeers and insults of the crowd were flung at him alone.

It was not that he was insensible. His drawn and tortured face showed what he was suffering. Bar-Abbas's keen eyes missed none of it.

About noonday the sun, which had been shining brightly, was suddenly blotted out by a black cloud which came down and hung over the land like a pall.

There was something threatening and ominous in it. The crowd fell silent, and many stole quietly back into the city.

The fears and memories of his childhood came back upon Bar-Abbas. He said to himself, as he would have said then: "God is angry at what they have done. It is *I* that ought to be on the cross there." And he was afraid to move.

At long intervals the man on the cross spoke—

strange words. Bar-Abbas, being of the country, understood the words, but their meaning was, for the most part, hidden from him. They but added to his puzzlement.

Just before the darkness came he saw a man and a woman go as near to the cross as the soldiers would let them, and stand looking up at it, and he thought the man on the cross spoke to them, but he was too far off to hear. Then they turned, with very sad faces, and went slowly down the mound towards the city, and he saw that the woman was weeping bitterly.

In the darkness, when he could see nothing, but was too afraid to go, he had time to think. And he thought again, as he had thought much in his dungeon, of the mess he had made of his life. It was only by some strange chance, by nothing less than a miracle indeed, that he was sitting here on this rock instead of hanging on that cross over there —a bad ending for any man's life.

He wondered what that other had done to deserve it. He did not look like a thief or a murderer. But one never knew. The fact, however, that the priests and their lot were against him inclined Bar-Abbas to think favourably of him. He could not go till he had learned something about him. By waiting the chance might come. So he sat and waited.

IV

About midway in the afternoon the darkness began to thin, and he could see the man on the cross again. And he saw that he was near his end, if not indeed already dead.

His head had fallen forward, and his body hung limp and relaxed. Of the other two, Gestas writhed and moaned in his increasing agonies at times, but he had no strength left for cursing. Dysmas hung quietly, with his head leaning on his right shoulder and his face turned towards the man on the middle cross.

Now that Bar-Abbas could see again he found that most of the crowd had gone, frightened by the blackness as he had been. But in front of him, some distance away, between him and the crosses, a woman was crouched on the ground, with her robe drawn over her head like one who mourns. And behind her, about as far away from her as he was himself, was a man lying flat on the ground, staring fixedly at the crosses; and even at that distance Bar-Abbas could see a wild, white gleam in his dark eye.

That, and the strange forward thrust of his head, made Bar-Abbas think of a snake, and made him wonder if the man was mad.

The man on the middle cross suddenly lifted his head and gave a loud cry: "Elôi, Elôi, lema sabachthanei!" which startled Bar-Abbas and all who heard it, even the soldiers. He had hung so long in silence that they had thought him dead or dying.

"He called on God," said Bar-Abbas to himself, with a feeling of awe. "He asked God why he was forsaken and left behind. Who and what manner of man can he be to speak to God in that strange way?"

Then he saw the Centurion offer him the sponge, but he was too far away to hear the murmured request for it.

Then followed quickly the other brief words, which Bar-Abbas heard clearly and never forgot: "Father, I trust my spirit to Thy hands."

Bar-Abbas could make nothing of that. The man gazed upwards and seemed to speak to God as one man speaks to another.

Then came a loud and startling cry: "It is finished!" And the man's head fell forward and he moved no more.

"He is dead," whispered Bar-Abbas to himself, hardly daring to breathe, yet glad that his suffering was over.

But even as he said it the ground beneath him

heaved and shuddered, as though God, on whom the man had called, would show his anger and wreck the world. And Bar-Abbas was sore afraid.

For he felt sure God's anger was directed against himself, since it was he that ought to have been on the cross and not that man who had taken his place.

He dared not move even when the ground had ceased shaking. It seemed to him that the quieter he kept himself, and the less attention he attracted, the safer it would be for him. So he shrank himself small, and sat and watched.

He saw the crouching woman creep nearer to the cross. He saw the Centurion speak to her. And then he saw her run forward and fall on her knees and embrace the feet of the dead man. He saw, too, her sudden wild start of amazement when she looked up into the man's face.

He wondered who she could be—the man's mother?—or wife?—or sister? If he waited he might be able to ask her. She could tell him who the man was, for he was evidently very dear to her.

Then, when she had gone reluctantly back to her place, he saw the prostrate man with the wild eyes creep up to her and talk with her against her will and with much vehemence.

And then, when the man on the cross had given that last great cry, and the soldiers had broken

Dysmas and Gestas, and their moans had died into silence, and one of the soldiers had thrust a spear through the heart of the other to make sure that he was dead, the wild-eyed man stood suddenly upright, and flung up his arms to the sky in a gesture of despair, and went swiftly down the mound in the gathering shadows.

It was as he sat watching, after the other had gone, that another strange thing befell him, though afterwards he could never be sure that it really was so. For his mind was so wrought and tangled that he could not judge things rightly.

As he sat gazing at the face of the man on the cross it seemed to him—and so surely that he started up from where he sat—that the man's great eyes opened suddenly in their hollows and looked straight at him—at him, Bar-Abbas—wistfully, entreatingly, as though he craved something of him.

But as he stared amazedly the eyes closed. And he could never be sure of it, but it remained with him as long as he lived.

Then presently he saw the little company come and take down the body from the middle cross with great care, and when they had wrapped it in a white cloth they bore it away down the mound.

The watching woman rose silently and followed them at a distance, and he followed the woman.

V

Bar-Abbas almost stumbled over the woman crouching on the ground again in the darkness.

He saw that the bearers had deposited the body of the man in a tomb near the foot of the mound, and presently they rolled a great round stone against the opening and went away.

The woman rose with a sigh, and was about to go also when Bar-Abbas spoke to her. This was the chance he had waited for. If any could tell him about this man, this woman could.

"Will you tell me who he was?" he asked eagerly. "And why they treated him so?"

She turned and stared at him through the darkness, and he saw that she was very comely, though her face was sad and swollen with much weeping.

"Who are you that does not know that?" she asked in surprise.

"I have been in prison—to the Romans," he added hastily. "Who was he, and why did they treat him so?"

And while she still regarded him doubtfully he said, so that she might understand fully why he was so urgent: "I am Jesus Bar-Abbas. They set me free, I know not why, and crucified him in my

place. Who was he, and why did they treat him so?"

He told her the simple truth about himself because of all that had been working so powerfully in him all day. Some great thing had happened to him. He did not know what. It was not simply that he was here alive, when by rights he ought to have been dead upon the cross. It was more than that, much more. He did not understand it, but he felt it. All he knew was that he had come out of his dungeon that morning to die, and by a wonder he had been given a new life. The marvel of that was never to leave him, but, as yet, it was all a great mystery to him.

The woman came from the north country and knew little of the doings in the south. She had heard the name Bar-Abbas for the first time that morning. It meant little to her, except that the mob had called for his release in place of the Master's.

"Jesus Bar-Abbas?" she said consideringly, as though groping in her jangled mind for a clue to him.

"Yes. They set me free, I know not why, and crucified this other instead of me. Who was he, and why did they that?"

"He is the Christ," she said, with all the pent-up emotion of the day in her voice. It was a vast relief

to her to speak to someone about the Master, after eating her heart in lonely grief through all the long hours of that terrible day.

"The Christ?" he said, much startled. "The Deliverer?"

"The Deliverer. The Promised One. He is the son of God."

"But . . . but . . ." gasped Bar-Abbas. "How then . . . ?" And he looked at the stone against the tomb.

"That is not the end," she said vehemently. "He foresaw this, and he promised us that he would come back to us. He will come."

"The dead do not come back."

"He will. If you had known him you would know that they could not end him so. With my own eyes I have seen him bring back to life some who had been dead many days. And what he said he would do he will do. He will come back to us."

"And end the Romans, and set up his Kingdom?" he asked eagerly. For of a man who could bring back to life those who had been dead, anything might be hoped and looked for.

"He never aimed at that. That is where they all mistook him—even those who knew him best!"

"What then?" he asked, much mystified.

"His Kingdom was to be in men's hearts. His aim was to win them back to God, his Father."

Bar-Abbas shook his head uncomprehendingly.

It was not possible for the teaching which had not fully entered into the hearts of the Master's followers after three years of closest intimacy to be understood by him at once.

"We have always looked for the Deliverer . . . but—from our enemies," said Bar-Abbas doggedly.

"There are enemies worse than Rome, and he *can* deliver from them. He delivered me. He gave me a new life. . . . And, by his death, from what you say, he has surely delivered you."

"Yes," said Bar-Abbas. But he was thinking only that if this other had not died on the cross it would have been himself.

"Bear him in your heart," she said earnestly. "Remember always that he died instead of you. And some time you will come to understand. . . . I must go now and tell the others where they have laid him."

She turned and went away towards the city. The gates would be closed, but there were ways by which she could enter.

Bar-Abbas stood for a time lost in thought and undecided which way to go.

Then he turned his back on the city and went away towards the country.

CHAPTER V

MARY AND THE SEAMLESS VEST

ENTERING the city by the Priests' portal, Mary sped rapidly along the narrow street which led upwards towards the house of that other Mary, mother of the young man John who was afterwards called Marcus, where she hoped to find some of their company.

It was the only place she knew where they would be likely to foregather.

Night had fallen, but the moon sailed high in a clear sky and she could find her way, though she did not know the city well.

Everything was strangely quiet compared with the turmoil of the previous night.

The place was packed with visitors from the country, come up for the Passover Feast, and the streets had then been filled with buzzing crowds—old friends meeting and greeting and passing the year's news, and all anxiously seeking their temporary lodging-places. It had been almost impossible to worm one's way through the excited throngs.

But to-night scarce a soul was to be seen. It was the beginning of a peculiarly holy day, when none but absolutely necessary work was allowed to be done. But there was more than that in the unnatural quietness that prevailed.

The blotting out of the day at noon, the earthquake that followed, the strange and portentous rending of the great curtain of the Temple, still more the unhappy doings at the Prætorium and on the mound outside the city, peculiarly ill-timed for the greatest and most solemn Feast of all the year—these all had struck deeply into many hearts, and there was dire soul-searching and anxious questioning among them.

The cloud that had blotted out the sun at noon had, indeed, drawn off and left the sky clear again, but it seemed as though it had settled down, black and heavy, on men's souls, and it lay there, a gloomy weight from which there was no escape.

In every thoughtful mind—ay, and in the hearts of many not greatly given to thinking—there was a bodeful feeling that something had happened—something dire and beyond their understanding.

As Mary sped along she came suddenly on two men standing at a doorway.

One was a soldier of Pilate's guard, the other an elderly Jew.

The Jew was holding up to the light of the moon a piece of white linen cloth, as it seemed to Mary, and there was bargaining going on between them.

At the sound of Mary's hurrying footsteps the old Jew, conscience-stricken at so flagrant a breach of the law—or, more probably, fearful lest this should be a neighbour who would tell of him—drew back into the darkness of his doorway, with the cloth still held in his extended arms, where the moonlight fell full upon it.

As Mary came up she had heard him say, in the tone of a reluctant buyer: "But, sir, it is all soiled. And, besides, it is soaked with blood."

And the other had replied with a laugh: "It will wash. And it is good blood—king's blood—the King of the Jews—a brave man too."

"No king but Cæsar," whined the old one, remembering the morning, and fearing lest he should be thought to endorse any such pretensions.

"Cringing dogs, you get what you deserve. But, anyway, it's worth more than three pieces, blood or no blood. It's all of a piece, you see—not a seam about it. We cast lots for it sooner than cut it up. Make it five, you old son of Satan, and it's yours."

"I give you four. Not one piece more."

But Mary's heart had leaped tumultuously within

her the moment her eyes fell on that stained white garment.

It was crumpled and soiled with the soldiers' rough handling, and it was stained with blood, but she knew it even before the soldier told what it was.

Now her heart seemed to flutter in her throat till it was like to choke her. Her much-loved Master's meil! She must have it! At that moment she craved it more than anything on earth. *His* meil! *He* had worn it! He had gone to his death in it! That was *his* dear blood upon it!

" Sir," she gasped, laying a hand shaking with eager entreaty on the soldier's arm, " I will give you ten pieces for it."

" *Ten pieces!* " in a whispered shriek from the old Jew. " *Ten pieces!*—I give you——"

But the soldier turned and looked at Mary—her face, under her cloak, white like marble in the cold light of the moon, very sad but very comely, and her eyes shining with the tears that had welled up again at thought of it all. Then he jerked the meil roughly out of the old Jew's hands and flung it to her.

" Not for a hundred pieces should you have it, you old rascal," he said to the Jew. And to Mary: " It is yours, my girl. Tell me now why you desire it so."

" I knew him and I loved him."

"Then I'm glad you have it, and not that old thief. . . . Our centurion says your man was something out of the ordinary run of men, though he was a Jew. And, by the gods, he bore himself like a man! He did not scream and curse as they usually do."

Mary folded up the stained garment, so utterly sacred to her, with trembling white hands, and pressed it tightly to her breast.

"I thank you, sir," she said, as she counted out the money to him and then sped on her way.

She never washed that sacred meil. She brushed away the soilings with infinite care. But the stains of blood, where it had been flung over the Master's shoulders after the scourging, she would not allow to be touched.

And when, long afterwards, she joined his mother and John, his disciple, at Ephesus, she found that his mother was treasuring the other meil which she had woven for him in the little house on the hillside at Nazaret, before he began the wanderings and teachings which led him at last to the Cross on Calvary.

So the two meils came together again, and they kept them ever fragrant with sprigs of rosemary, as had always been his mother's custom. But of the two they both prized most dearly the one which bore the stains of their dear one's suffering and triumph.

CHAPTER VI

SIMON THE CROSS-BEARER

SIMON came from Cyrene, on the coast of Africa, and bought a plot of land not far from Bethany.

He built himself a small house there, and made a fair living by growing fruit and vegetables for the capacious maw of Jerusalem.

His wife was a good woman and an excellent housewife, and they had two sons, Rufus and Alexander, who were beginning to be of help to their father in the fields.

They knew Lazarus and his sisters, Mary and Martha, and through them they had heard about their friend Jesus, the wonderful Teacher from Galilee.

With all the other friends of the sisters they had been astounded by the bringing back of Lazarus after he had died and been buried.

They rejoiced with his sisters and friends at his return, but ever afterwards held him much in awe. For to die and come back to life again was an

unheard-of experience, and it seemed to them that it set Larazus somewhat apart from all other men, though the feeling may have been more present to them than to him.

But if his return evoked that attitude in them, what of their feelings towards the Master who had the power to do such a wonderful thing?

He was quite beyond their understanding, of course, and his teaching was very strange to them. But he himself was so gracious and kindly, so wise and so simple, so far above them and yet so lovable and so lovingly desirous of their and all men's good, that their hearts were greatly drawn to him, and they tried hard to understand and follow the ways he taught.

The city was always packed to its uttermost at Passover time, and such as could not find accommodation there overflowed into the surrounding country and put up tents and booths for the week of the Feast.

Such multitudes needed much feeding, and for Simon it was always a good and profitable time.

That morning he had set off with the boys, Rufus and Alexander, each carrying a full basket, and he himself carrying two, and he looked forward to a good day's business.

Just as they were entering the city a tumultuous

mob came pouring through the Gate and they drew back into safety to let it go past.

But while he was still wondering what it was all about, Simon's eyes found the core of the tumult and opened wide under his pinched brows at what he saw.

Indeed he could hardly believe his eyes. For there, staggering under the two great beams which portended a crucifixion, and stumbling pitifully at every few steps, was the Great Teacher, he whom they loved and reverenced as the one who had restored to them their friend Lazarus when he was dead.

And he was obviously in very evil case. He had been bruised and beaten. They could see the blood on his shoulders, and his face, which they had always seen so gracious and kindly, was covered with dirt, and with blood from a mock crown made of thorn, which had been crushed cruelly into his forehead.

He was evidently at the end of his strength. When he stumbled under the heavy beams, and fell, some of those nearest to him laughed and jeered, and struck at him with sticks.

But the centurion in charge put a stop to that by drawing his short sword and threatening them with it. Then, seeing that the man could not get along

under that burden, he looked searchingly round, and his eyes fell on Simon, standing there agape with amazement.

"Here—you!" he called. "You are strong. Carry you the big beam. It is too much for him."

And Simon, knowing well that there was no arguing with a Roman, dropped his baskets, hastily bade the boys stop by them till he came back, and manfully shouldered the longer beam. As he took it the Master looked at him, and Simon was awed by all that he saw in those agonized eyes, which yet shone bravely and lovingly. He never forgot that look.

Up to the top of the mound Simon bore the beam in front of the Master, filled with sorrow and amazement at it all. And within him, below all the puzzlement of it, was a great hope that this mighty Wonder-Worker, though submitting to all this for some unimaginable purpose of his own, would presently, as he most certainly could, rise up in his might and bring confusion upon his tormentors.

But that did not come to pass. Simon kept as near to the Master as they would let him. He saw and heard all that passed. And with all that he saw and heard his amazement grew.

At intervals he wondered how it fared with the boys. He hoped they might somehow get their loads

into the city and dispose of them. But this that was going on under his eyes left him little time to think of anything else. It was too absorbing, too amazing, too utterly upsetting of all his previous thoughts and hopes of the Great Teacher.

It was not until the terrifying darkness had passed, and the earthquake, and he saw from the centurion's actions that the Master was undoubtedly dead, that he tore himself away and went down the mound towards the city to see if he could find the boys.

He forgot his last hasty words to them, and hoped they might be safe at home with the money for the fruit and vegetables.

But he found them just where he had left them, and in a sorry plight. For, after he had gone off with the soldiers, certain evil-disposed ones in the crowd, who had been foremost in jeering and baiting the Teacher, noticed what had happened.

They saw the full baskets. They saw the owner of them hauled away to carry the beam. And they saw their opportunity. There was no profit in baiting the man with the cross. They had seen many crucifixions. Here was a chance of making something.

Three of them drew away from the crowd, let it stream past them, and then went back to the boys and the baskets. They seized the baskets, and when

the lads expostulated, and tried to recover them, they beat them senseless with their sticks, and, leaving them lying, went on into the city to dispose of their plunder.

When the boys came to themselves, bruised and bleeding, they could do nothing but sit and wait for their father, as he had bidden them. And there he found them and heard their doleful story.

The loss meant much to him, and the brutal treatment of his boys filled him with wrath, but in the shadow of what he had been witnessing up above it all seemed of small account.

He comforted the lads as well as he could, praised them for sticking so faithfully to their post, and said: "Let us get home to mother."

With her also her husband's story of all he had seen and heard on the mound far exceeded the loss they had suffered. She bathed and bound the boys' wounds and bruises, and comforted them and got them to bed.

And as she left them she said quietly: "What those men have made by stealing our fruit will not profit them. You will sleep better this night than they."

And she and Simon sat long into the morning, talking with sorrow and amaze of the strange and terrible doings of that day.

"The world has lost more than we have to-day," she said, when Simon referred to the theft of their goods. "It can ill spare a good man, and he was the most wonderful we have ever known."

. . . . . .

Five-and-twenty years later, when Simon was dead, his wife was living in Rome, and the boys, Rufus and Alexander, were stalwart leaders of the church there.

Of them Paul wrote: "Salute that choice Christian, Rufus; also his mother, who has been a mother to me."

And John Marcus, ten years later, when writing his recollections of the Master and his teaching, told how it was the father of their colleagues, Rufus and Alexander, who had the eternal honour of bearing the Master's cross.

CHAPTER VII

FROM CORNELIUS PUDENS FLACCUS AT JERUSALEM TO SERGIUS PAULUS GRÆCINUS AT ROME

The Kalends of June in the eighteenth year of Tiberius.

YOUR very welcome letter reached me but yesterday. My heart rejoiced greatly at sight of it.

You tell me you have written several times in these last three years but have had no answers from me. Well, I too have written several times and have received no answer from you. So we will lay the blame on the post, which in these days leaves much to be desired. But the fact, which I now learn for the first time, that you have been in Gaul and Spain with your father, suggests ample reason for our letters not reaching their destinations.

All your good news of your family interests me enormously. Your father and mother were always so kind and gracious to the lonely boy who found your home so much more of a home than his own. I am hinting no reproach against any. But, after the ever-to-be-regretted death of my mother, my

father's duties to the Empire absorbed him more and more, as you know, and without your home, and its ever-warm welcome, life would indeed have been a dull affair for me.

That your sister, the Lady Pomponia, has innumerable suitors is no surprise to me. It would be strange indeed were it otherwise. For my recollection of her as a girl, three years ago, has suffered no eclipse—nor can. A warmer heart and a loftier soul enshrined in a more exquisite temple I do not think it would be possible to find. It may please her to add a lonely exile in this distant land of Palestine to the number of her worshippers.

But what supremely challenges me in your admirable letter is your question anent the young Jewish Teacher who was just beginning to stir up this old hive—this old wasps' nest rather—about the time you returned to Rome.

I recall now your interest in him, but I should have expected it to be entirely overlaid by all your wonderful experiences since you left us. I am indeed glad that it is not so.

I will tell you as clearly as I can all that I know about him. And that involves the confession of an unworthiness on my part which causes me now most poignant shame and sorrow. But, remembering that I was then but a thoughtless boy, not yet

fifteen, your friendship will condone it with sympathy and understanding. You and yours were ever kind to my failings, for you recognized that I had been denied that helpfulness of discipline and example which you yourselves enjoyed in such ample measure.

To tell you first of my lapse, for from it all the rest follows.

You remember how, on their great Spring Feast-Day, the Jews from everywhere gathered at Jerusalem, in the city and around it.

It was always an anxious time for us all, and especially for the Procurator, for none ever knew in what fresh way their excitable spirits might break out. And with two million or more of them massed within that circumscribed area, and liable to burst into flame if a spark fell, even unintentionally, upon the dry tinder of their patriotism or their perverse natures, Pilate had to walk very circumspectly, since he would be held responsible if any trouble came.

His position was the more difficult because, as you know, his patron, Sejanus, was in disfavour at Rome, and Pilate's enemies—of whom he made many by his brusque and overbearing manner—were, as he well knew, busily endeavouring to bring about his downfall.

He was not a bad ruler and he endeavoured to hold the scales justly. But, truly, it was difficult among this strange people, at odds among themselves, yet united in the pride of a great belief that they were a unique race, destined by the one God whom they worshipped to dominate the whole world when the time appointed came.

They believed that appointed time close at hand, and they all looked eagerly and anxiously for the coming of a great deliverer and leader who should bring their mighty hopes to fruition.

Many such had arisen from time to time but had been promptly suppressed, and I have seen the land bristling with the crosses on which their hopes ended.

Then came the young Teacher about whom you inquire. His name was Jesus-ben-Joseph, and he came from Galilee—Herod's province, up in the north.

He was different from all who had come before him. And he had a foreteller and forerunner—a strange, wild prophet whom Herod slew. But before he died, this prophet, John, distinctly indicated the other—Jesus—who, by the way, was his own cousin—as the expected Deliverer.

The teaching of this Jesus-ben-Joseph seems to have been entirely good and towards the promotion

of peace and good-will in men's hearts, and in no smallest degree subversive of, or inimical to, the Empire. But it cut across the old traditional religion of the Jews in many important respects, and that brought upon him the venomous opposition of the priests. You remember *them* and can appreciate the position.

You may wonder at my intimate knowledge of these matters, which, indeed, only came to me later. But that I will explain presently.

My father had rented a small estate outside the city—just a vineyard and a little house and some melon-patches and fig-trees—where we could spend the hot months when the narrow streets became unbearable.

And to it he had sent me with one of our servants a day or two before the Great Feast, with orders that I was not on any account to go into the city until the Feast was over and the crowds had dispersed. I think he feared trouble.

And it seemed that he was justified. For all through the night before the Feast the city growled like a hungry beast, and I was full of curiosity as to what was going on there.

Early in the morning we heard at times sharp outbursts of cries, as though the hungry beasts were quarrelling over their food, and I went out and

stood gazing at the walls as though I expected them to burst suddenly asunder with the violence within.

I had promised my father not to go inside, but that did not restrain me from drawing as near as I dared.

And then, out of the Damascus Gate, opposite which I was lingering, there burst a bristling crowd, like an angry flood through a gap in a dam.

In the middle of it I could see some of our soldiers keeping off the crowd from several malefactors bearing their crosses. A crucifixion, then, or several! And I watched all that passed eagerly.

I do not think I am naturally cruel or bloodthirsty. But at fifteen I was certainly more callous to other people's feelings than I am now. I had no idea what these men had done to deserve the cross —a ghastly punishment, as you know—and I did not particularly care. But as the crowd surged past me I was drawn along with it, like a leaf in the whirl of a torrent.

As it chanced, those nearest me were the roughest and noisiest of all. They jeered and cursed the prisoners as though they were their mortal enemies. Those inside were trying to hit with their sticks one of them who kept stumbling under the weight of his big beams. Those outside who could not get at him hurled stones and curses.

A Jewish boy alongside me picked up a stone and threw it, and missed. With really no intent but to show that a Roman could aim better than a Jew—for I knew nothing whatever about the prisoners, except that every man's hand seemed against them, and therefore they must be getting only their dues—I picked up a couple of stones also, and hurled one at the man against whom the venom of the crowd seemed chiefly directed.

It was not a large stone, nor a sharp one, I am thankful now to remember, for my fingers had fitted comfortably round it as I hefted it before throwing. And it flew straight. It struck the man on the side of the head, and—and here is the amazing pith and core of my story—the man turned his head, and out of all that leaping, raging crowd he looked straight at *me*—as though in some strange way effect and cause were instantly united in his mind. And such a look, Sergius Paulus! It has been with me ever since. Night and day I see it, and I shall see it till I die. But I could never make you understand all that was in it—sorrow, for me—gentle reproach, as though he asked why I had done it—no ill-will, forgiveness rather—and a strange desire for my good-will. All those and very much more which I cannot put into words, for it was beyond my understanding.

But that look of his—in spite of the terrible state he was in, covered with blood and sweat and mud, and rigged out in an old purple robe and a mock crown—shot right through me, deep into my very heart. For, you must know, in spite of his pitiful condition, there was about him a strange, gentle dignity which, as it seemed to me, set him apart from any man I had ever met. I cannot think of any man I know who, placed as that man was, could possibly have looked as he did. And, truly, compared with him, those who were baiting him seemed no more than mad apes.

The other stone dropped from my hand as his eyes sought and found me. I stood stricken, and let the crowd surge past. When I came to myself I was all alone. Then I pulled myself together and followed him, drawn by that look, and because I could not help myself.

The crowd was gathered on and about a mound, on which, after the hideous sound of the hammering, the three crosses were set up. I stood on the edge of the crowd and watched. The man I had stoned was the middle one of the three. I knew him by his mock crown, and, besides, there was that about him which made him quite different from the other two.

The titulus nailed above his head said, "THE

KING OF THE JEWS," which did not convey any meaning to me, unless it might be that he was one more of the many who were continually raising futile little rebellions against the power of Rome.

Then suddenly the light of day went out and all was darker than the darkest night, and I confess I was terrified, as were all those about me. They had been jeering and railing at the man on the cross. In the darkness they fell silent and some wailed and beat their breasts in fear.

How long that darkness lasted I do not know. There was in me a great fear that the light had gone for ever and that this was the end of the world, and I know that many of those near me feared the same.

It was evident that this in which we were all participating was not approved by the gods. And when, after a time that seemed interminable, the earth reeled and shuddered beneath us we were assured of it.

I knew for certain that it was all because of that strange man on the middle cross. And I had thrown a stone at him! I was full of fears, and many strange thoughts such as I had never known before were at work in me.

The man died there on his cross during the darkness, and it was many days before I could learn

the truth about him, not, indeed, till the Feast was over and we returned to the city. I was very eager to learn who he was and all about him, but it would have been no use asking the people among whom I stood in the darkness, for they were all too terrified either to think or speak properly.

I wonder if you remember the boy John, whose mother had a house on the Mount, where she always made you and me very welcome. Well, it is from him that I have learned all that I know about the man on the cross.

John and his mother knew him well, and were very full of his wonderful teaching and his almost unbelievable doings.

They were in the habit of going up into Galilee for the hot season, and there they had a little house on the hillside at Nazaret, the very next house to the one in which the Teacher—Jesus-ben-Joseph—had been born and lived for many years. So they knew all his friends, and they had met him; they loved him very dearly, and they held him in highest reverence. In fact, and in a word, they hold him to be the veritable son of their one God.

It is all very amazing. With the strange appealing challenge of that strange man's eyes ever before me, drawing me against my will, asking of me something that I did not understand, I was eager

to learn everything I could about him. And I got from John everything he could tell me.

Both he and his mother assert—quietly, but with absolute conviction—that their friend, Jesus, the Teacher, came back into the world after his death upon the cross. And very many here in Jerusalem —hundreds, perhaps thousands—say the same. They have seen him and conversed with him. They cannot all be lying. And as to John and his mother, I would stake my life on their truthfulness and freedom from guile.

Yet Longinus, the Centurion, assures me that the man was beyond all doubt dead before they permitted his body to be taken down from the cross. He saw the body put into a tomb, and the tomb sealed at the request of the priests. But when the tomb was opened on the third day afterwards the body was not there, nor has any trace of it ever been found by the priests, who would have given half their possessions to get hold of it. But John and his mother and all these others say he has been back with them in that same body, bearing the wounds of the nails in his hands and feet.

Longinus, with whom I have spoken much of this matter, is a hard man, a very capable soldier, and a good judge of men. All that he witnessed at that crucifixion impressed him deeply. He holds,

with absolute conviction, that the man Jesus, whom they crucified there, was more than any ordinary man. "In my own mind," he said to me slowly and weightily, "I am satisfied that he was a son of God." I do not think he quite understands what he means by that, but, coming from such a man, it is very striking.

John and his mother, of course, say the same thing, and they do undoubtedly mean what they say and also understand what they mean.

They say, as regards his teaching, that even his closest followers never quite understood that the Kingdom he hoped to establish was not—as they had all believed—a new Kingdom of the Jews, but a new reign of their One God—a Kingdom of truth and right-doing and good-will in the hearts of all men everywhere. Think that out and you will see what a wonderful change it would make in the world. He claimed to be the son of their God, Jehovah, and belief in and love for Jehovah, and in himself as Jehovah's son and representative, were the keys which would open for them the gates of this New Kingdom of God.

So much for his teaching. As to himself, they say that he was the noblest and gentlest and kindest and wisest of men, and that his whole life was given to good deeds.

With their own eyes they have seen him cleanse lepers with a touch, and with a word open the eyes of men born blind. And—they have seen him call back to life men who have been dead many days.

Why, then, you will ask, if his doings and his teaching were all so good, did they crucify him? And the answer to that is a simple one.

You cannot but remember the priests here and their ways—rigid observance of their old laws and traditions to the very last letter, punctilious ceremonial, which had lost most of its meaning for the people, gross self-seeking.

The new Teacher stood for the very opposite of all these. There was not room in this small country for them both. So, to save themselves, the crafty ones plotted his death and brought him to the cross.

But if they hoped by that to end him and his teaching, never were men more deluded or doomed to disappointment.

The Teacher's followers scattered like sheep in dismay at his death. But since his return they have become very lions for courage, and their teaching of the New Kingdom spreads with every day that passes.

Yes, if you have read thus far, your friendly soul sees where I am in this matter.

The challenge of those great appealing eyes of the

man with the cross has drawn my heart and soul to him. The more I learn of him and his way the more am I drawn.

Should the teaching reach Rome, as I foresee that it will, for it is spreading throughout the world, give heed to it, Sergius Paulus, for in it is a new and richer life than the world has ever known.

Forgive the length of this epistle. You asked. I have answered. I trust it will reach you safely.

Commend me, I pray, to your father and mother and your sister.

I salute you with all the warmth of our old friendship.

NOTE

JUDAS of Kerioth is to most of us, I suppose, an insoluble puzzle.

When Christ chose him as one of the twelve, one cannot but believe that, like the others, he had in him the makings of a good disciple. What, then, warped him to what he became?

Some say greed of gain—that he fell out of tune with the Master through his growing love of money —that his appointment as keeper of the common purse fostered that feeling and gave him opportunities for peculation, of which he availed himself. I do not remember that this is anywhere authoritatively so stated.

The more feasible explanation of him seems to me that suggested by Whately and others: that, like the other disciples, he entirely misunderstood the Master's mission and aims. They all hoped and looked for the establishment of an earthly kingdom. They wrangled among themselves as to the various positions they might occupy in it.

It is permissible to imagine Judas uplifted at the triumphal entrance into the city on Palm Sunday,

and again by the authoritative action of Christ in the Temple. He knew that this wonderful Master of his possessed supernatural powers. He had, with his own eyes, seen the dead raised. No greater power was possible. The man who could do that was more than man, and there was no limit to what he could accomplish—if he chose to exert his powers.

No earthly might could stand against him. Therefore, if he chose, he could without doubt establish his kingdom on earth and give the Jews their rightful place in the world.

When at last it was borne in upon him that that was not to be—that the high hopes in which he had revelled for so long were to come to nothing—one can well imagine two springs of action in him.

First, overwhelming disappointment, a feeling of having been misled, and a peasant-like inclination to strike back. "You've deceived us. You have led us all on by false pretences. Have at you!"

And, secondly, a deeper, larger, more subtle feeling that the Master could do all they wanted if only he would, but that now, when the prize was within his reach, for some inscrutable reason he seemed to be backing out. His courage had failed him. He had all the power needed, but he seemed disinclined to use it. The only thing to do was to push him forward even against his will.

When the Master saw to what lengths the High Priest would go, he would act. It was not in human nature to suffer wrong when one had the power to obliterate the oppressor. Which, of course, was just where Judas—with the rest—misunderstood their Master and the meaning of him. So—to the Priests, to give away both his Master and his teaching; and so—to the end. This seems to me more credible than that for a mere handful of coin—the price of a slave—Judas would sell one whom he had followed as a disciple for three years.

Possibly, with the cunning and cupidity of the peasant, he thought he saw his way to making the High Priests pay for helping him to bring about the very thing he wanted.

Then, when at last he saw that the matter had gone beyond what he intended, and that his Master's death was certain, remorse and fear gripped him.

Even then, when he saw the Master hanging dead upon the cross, he may still have nourished the belief that one who could raise others from the dead could without doubt still come down and make an end of his enemies—could still found that kingdom which he had led them to expect.

And that belief and expectation would die hard in him.

When he saw the body borne away for burial,

and all the Master's work buried with him, the disciples scattered and in hiding, nothing left of all their mighty expectations, then he knew that it was the end. Everything had miscarried and he made an end of himself.

This possibility is not put forward with the idea of whitewashing Judas, but simply as a not unreasonable solution of the mystery of his action.

God lighted Him a Candle
And set It on a Stick,
That It might lighten all the World
And make all Dead Souls quick.
And still that Candle burns—and burns,
With Never-Wasting Wick.

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